

The Concept of Spiritual Perfection according to Ali ibn Sina and Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi

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ABSTRACT: A complete understanding of ethical and spiritual perfection must be acquired within the context of the metaphysical world-view of any particular school. This is because spiritual and ethical perfection presupposes knowledge of the soul and the means by which it acquires perfections. A comprehensive theory of the soul, therefore, constitutes the theoretical framework through which any coherent argument of spiritual perfection can be posited. The present paper analyses the metaphysical foundations of spiritual perfection as held by Ali ibn Sina and Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi. Since Ibn Sina represents the school of Peripatetic philosophy and Al-Qunawi represents the school of gnosticism (Sufism), this paper will examine and compare the theory of the soul, its divisions, and its perfections, as articulated by two of the most important exponents of these schools.

Introduction

Earliest sources reveal that the science of ethics has played a fundamental role in the development of Islamic thought and practice. Evidence for this is found in the Qur'an, Hadith corpus, and the writings of scholars in the formative period of Islam as well as the philosophers and Sufis. The study of ethics and spiritual psychology by Muslim philosophers and mystics has been primarily a study of the soul, its essence, its divisions, its states, its proclivities, as well as its motions. Early ethicists such as Ali ibn Sina (370/980-428/1037) and Nasir al-Din Tusi (the best expositor of Ibn Sina's ideas, 597/1201-672/1274) who are both considered exemplars of Peripatetic philosophy, wrote extensively on the soul's divisions, its faculties, its defects and perfections, and the nature of happiness. It is within the framework of their philosophical world-view that a theory of ethics had arisen and in turn comprised the desirable course of action to achieve happiness. The concept of the soul has played the central role in ethical theories in Islam, because it is through the soul that all human actions arise. In one of the most comprehensive works on ethics, *Jami' al-Sa'adat*, the author, Mahdi Naraq, defines ethics as "dispositions." The word for ethics in Arabic is *akhlaq*, which is the plural of *khulq*, and lexically means disposition. He defines it as, "the quality of the soul (*malakah*) which is the source of all those activities that man performs spontaneously...At the time of creation, the soul of man is like a clean tablet devoid of all traits, whether good or evil. As one progresses through life, he develops faculties which are directly related to the way he lives, thinks and acts."¹ Since all human actions arise from the human soul, it is necessary to understand the way in which both the philosopher and mystic view the soul, with respect to its ontological status as well as the nature of its activities. Instead of approaching ethics from a purely utilitarian point of view, both philosopher and mystic engaged in thorough investigations of the ontological basis of human actions such that their ethical theories were in harmony with their metaphysical and religious world-view.

It is within the framework of their metaphysical world-view that a theory of ethics had arisen and in turn comprised the desirable course of action to achieve happiness. Ibn Sina's theory of ethics is a direct result of his philosophical and systematic conception of the universe and

man's position in it. Thus, in keeping with his logic-oriented system, he categorizes ethics as a branch among the different branches of philosophy, except that it is carried out by what he calls the Practical Intellect.

The study of the soul from the perspective of Sufism, however, is a slightly different task. Although some of the same divisions of the soul made by the Peripatetics may still apply, if one views ethical progress, or rather, spiritual purification in the works of Sufis such as Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, he will find a different cosmological framework with which to work. The operative concept among the Sufis is Divine effusion and the ontological comprehensiveness of the Human-Divine Reality, i.e. *al-insan al-kamil*.

While both Ibn Sina and Al-Qunawi speak of the soul's perfection as the ultimate goal for man, what perfection means for each thinker will largely determine how one goes about reaching that goal. This paper attempts to focus on the meaning of the "perfect soul" from the perspective of these two thinkers keeping in mind the structure of their cosmological system. While Ibn Sina's perfection lies in the human intellect uniting (*ittisal*) with the Active Intellect, Al-Qunawi emphasizes the ontological embracing of the Divine Attributes in the "Perfect Human" (*al-insan al-kamil*).

Ali ibn Sina

To begin with, it is necessary to briefly outline Ibn Sina's theory of the soul. He defines the soul initially as "the first perfection for the natural body possessing organs through which the functions of life are carried out, such as digestion, growth, reproduction, perception, movement, will, and rationality." He elaborates on this definition by dividing the soul into three parts. "One of them is the vegetal (soul), the first perfection of a natural body possessing organs in regard to reproduction, growth, and nourishment. The second is the animal soul, the first perfection of a natural body possessing organs in regard to perceiving particulars, and moving through will. And the third is the rational soul, which can be divided into Practical faculty and Theoretical faculty, both of which are called the intellect. The Practical faculty is that which initiates actions in accordance with deliberation and intentions. It has a relationship with the animal faculty of appetite, imagination and itself. Its relationship with itself is such that, with the Theoretical Intelligence, it forms opinions concerning actions, as, for example, that lying is evil, and injustice is evil, but not in the way of proving them since these have been proven by pure rational premises in the books of logic. This faculty must govern all the other faculties of the body...."³

The most basic linguistic definition of a human being given by Ibn Sina in his *Al-Isharat* is "rational animal," which includes the genus, "animal," and the differentium "rational."⁴ In more specific terms, when Ibn Sina discusses the human soul, it is the rational aspect of the soul which is the central focus. Man is known as such by means of his rational soul, not the soul which he shares with the other animals. Furthermore, this division leads to the enumeration of faculties of the human soul at each of the three distinct levels such that function of the vegetative soul is concerned with nutrition of the physical body and generation of the species; the function of the animal soul is involved with organic perception through the five external senses and voluntary motion towards its pleasure and away from its harm. The human soul is that which is particularized by the faculty of reason, that is, through its essence, is able to perceive as intelligible both universals and particulars through the faculty of the Theoretical Intellect and distinguish between good and evil through the faculty of the Practical Intellect.⁵ The study of ethics, for Ibn Sina, then, is the edification of the Practical Intellect through the Theoretical Intellect to govern and direct other two aspects of the soul – the vegetative and the animal. Returning back to the definition of man as a "rational animal" (*al-hayawan al-natiq*), Ibn Sina uses this definition as a point of departure for acquiring ethical traits through the faculty of reason. To begin with, the soul's perfection lies in its completion of its essence and

the attainment of its fullest potentiality. In the case of man, it is actualizing his rational faculty (*natiqiyyah*) by adorning it with knowledge and applying it to govern his animal nature (*haywaniyyah*). Thus, the process of the soul toward its perfection is the ascent from the condition of animality to humanity, or rather, from potentiality to actuality of the intellectual faculty.

In the *Mi'raj Namih*, Ibn Sina writes,

Every kind of knowledge that reaches the soul and every happiness that appears in it are all the fruit of the management of the intellect. The purpose of the intellect is to promote happiness in the soul by means of knowledge, and the purpose of the (rational) soul (*nafs*) is to along with the (intellect's) help, to separate intelligibles (*ma'qulat*) from among sensibles (*mahsusat*) and convey them to the intellect. Perfection, nobility, and greatness lie in intelligibles. The nobility of the soul, thus, lies in two things, the rational soul and the intellect. Neither of these two is from the world of corporeal bodies [*ajsam*]; rather they are from the higher world. They are governors of the body not its residents. That which the rational soul affirms with the pen of knowledge on the tablet of the intellect concerning aspects of truth and abstract form, which is rationality, is shared with the angels.⁶

In the above description we see the direct relationship of man's status as being the isthmus (*barzakh*) between the corporeal world of animality and dense bodies, and higher angelic realms (*malakuti*), where he obtains the provisions for adorning his soul with perfections.

It is also of prime importance to understand the meaning of intellect in the context of Ibn Sina's metaphysics. The root of the Arabic word for intellect is '*aql*' which means to tie or bind. Its function is to tether ideas in the mind through limiting and defining them. The intellect gains access to universals and particulars through the process of a "complete definition" (*hadd al-tamm*), using the genus (*jins*) and differentia (*fasl*) such as the example above of man being "a rational animal."⁷ This definition of intellect, however, is not the only definition, as we will see in the discussion of Al-Qunawi's description of spiritual ascent. Ibn Sina does not however, limit himself to only this definition of the intellect. It is only at the lower levels of rational speculation does the use of definition and delimitation come into context. Otherwise there is a progression of eight intellects mentioned in the *Mi'raj Namih*, which endow man with various perfections in the soul. For example, "The one who becomes guided by the first intellect is united with purity and subtlety. One who becomes guided by the Second, has a quick wit that easily understands fields of knowledge..." and so on until he reaches and unites with the Universal Intellect (*aql-i kull*). Thus, the intellect is the means by which one can move from unknown (*majhul*) to known (*ma'lum*) such that knowledge will be the direct cause of comprehending the Truth and adorning the soul with Its attributes.

In the *Isharat*, Ibn Sina does, however, allude to the fact that it is possible for one to reach moral perfection through perfecting the Practical Intellect without perfecting the Theoretical Intellect. However, for the purpose of this paper, this distinction will not be discussed. What is important, however, is the emphasis placed on discursive reasoning in defining good and evil traits. For Ibn Sina, each moral virtue is discerned by the Theoretical Intellect through knowledge and habituated through the Practical Intellect until virtue becomes second nature. Discerning ethical virtues and vices and finding the balance between their extremes is achieved through discursive reasoning and philosophical inquiry, since such an inquiry is precisely the process of defining things and assigning them their proper place in reality. Likewise, Ibn Sina divides the primary virtues into four: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, each of which has an extreme and a defect. For example, excess of courage results in rashness while its defect lies in cowardice. The golden mean is achieved as a result of the cooperation of intellectual faculties so that the soul is governed not by the blind dictates of the animal faculty, but by "man" himself.

One of the fundamental notions of Peripatetic philosophy and in philosophy in general is the duality of being and quiddity and of form and matter. In Ibn Sina's tripartite division of Necessary Being (or God), contingent beings, and impossible beings, all contingent existing beings have two aspects, being and quiddity. Furthermore, contingent beings can be either substance (*jawhar*), simple beings which necessarily exist independently "but receive from the first cause the quality of being necessary, that is intelligences and angelic substances," or "those that are only contingent, that is, the composed bodies of the sublunary region which come in to being and pass away."⁸ Substance, which does not need to exist in a locus and whose existence is not supported by a locus, "possesses contingency (*mumkin*) and is completely separate (*mujarrad*) from all matter and potentially called Intellect (*'aql*). A second division of substance is one "whose being is one, but accepts the form of other beings but is indivisible and separate from matter, such as soul (*nafs*), and that which accepts divisibility such as body (*jism*). It is apparent that these three substances – Intellect, Soul and Body – correspond to the composition of man, each assuming a position in the hierarchy of being, with Intellect being most transcendent, most noble, and having proximity to the Divine Intellect. While the body being divisible, dense, and least luminous is most distant from the Necessary Being and Active Intellect. It shares little illumination from the Active Intellect and is simply a "mount" for the soul.

Since being can only be manifested with respect to quiddities – otherwise, it would be Pure Being and would consequently have no observable manifestation – matter is "that which supports the quiddity or form. Matter can only exist by the form imparted to it by the Intellect; without form, it would be pure receptivity deprived of reality."⁹ Intellect, then, is the vehicle for the appropriate realization of quiddity and the source of multiplicity of being. That which is dependent upon something which is independent of it is ontologically weaker and characterized by non-being and thus possesses fewer perfections of the Necessary Being, who is perfect in all respects and is totally independent of the cosmos. Furthermore, the Necessary Being is also called the Active Intellect because it engenders "being," which is perpetually in a state of passivity, and assigns it quiddities, which consequently produces external existence. Thus, the hierarchy of being is such that corporeal existence is considered the least perfect among creation, while the Intellect, due to its proximity to the Active Intellect, and its being independent from matter and potentiality, assumes the highest, most perfect, and most beautiful designation. Thus, man's perfection lies, not only in his acquiring moral virtues, by which he reforms his inner being, but also ascends in the hierarchy of ontological perfections. Man's use of his intellect, essentially draws him away from his corporeal reality towards a Reality which is perfect in all aspects. Since the intellect is the bridge between corporeality and Divinity, if matter that supports form is not perfect, then the union (*ittisal*) will not take place. In more concrete terms, since good acts (matter) originate from the disposition (*malakah*) of the soul, and disposition (form) results from reforming the Practical Intellect, ethics is the relationship of the intellect's union with the Active Intellect in order to impress the most perfect form onto matter. The process is not only discursive, but an upward ascent, from materiality towards immateriality, and multiplicity towards unity, ultimately arriving at the Active Intellect.

One of the most important discussions in Ibn Sina's ethical philosophy and likewise, his concept of perfection, is that of "natural purpose" in engendered creation. We see a movement of all things according to their natural purpose for which they were created. According to Ibn Sina, because the final aim of all things is goodness and perfection, all beings would eventually move towards this very perfection were it not for certain obstacles. Even in nature, the death of a beautiful creature is actually a movement towards a greater good, insofar as that creature decomposes and nourishes the environment for other creatures to come about. "The death of man, for example, serves the purpose of freeing the soul to complete and perfect itself."¹⁰ In his *Risalah fi al-'Ishq*, he writes:

Every being which is determined by a design strives by nature toward perfection, i.e., that goodness of reality which ultimately flows from the reality of the Pure Good, and by nature, it shies away from its specific defect which is the evil in it, i.e., materiality and non-being—for every evil results from attachment to matter and non-being.¹¹

But in the case of man, who stands as the isthmus between animality and Divinity, his purpose is not occasioned solely through the cycle of nature rather it is borne out of free will and the rational soul. Man's true purpose, as a "rational animal," is to fulfill the functions of the rational faculty, which is "endowed with the ability to perceive without organ and to distinguish between the things perceived." Nasir al-Din Tusi, the most famous commentator of Ibn Sina and best expositor of his ideas, further says, "Now, inasmuch as its direction is to knowledge of the reality of and comprehension of the types of intelligibles, this faculty is called Speculative Intelligence; and inasmuch as its direction is to control of object distinction between good and evil actions, and the discovery of arts for the ordering of life's affairs, so – in this sense – this faculty is called Practical Intelligence. Man's perfection lies in that which particularizes his existence as Man and fulfills the function of his particularity."¹² Ibn Sina writes in the *Isharat wa al-Tanbihat*, "The perfection of the rationality is such that the vision of the First Truth is represented in it inasmuch as it apprehends Its magnificence. Then, all of existence is represented in this substance since existence is free from material attachments...this is the perfection which the intellectual substance becomes actual."¹³ Man's animal perfection lies in the proper functioning of the vegetative faculty and animal faculty through growth and sensory experience; the perfection of the rational faculty lies in perfecting the Theoretical and Practical Intellect.

In this regard, Nasir al-Din Tusi writes in the *Akblaq-i-Nasiri*,

The perfection of the Practical Faculty lies in organizing and ordering its own particular faculties and acts so that they are in agreement and conformity. So the first Perfection is concerned with speculation, and is (as it were) the form, while the Second Perfection can be regarded as matter. Just as form without matter, or matter without form, can possess no stability of permanence, so theory without practice is abortive, and practice without theory is absurd. Theory is the starting point and practice is the conclusion. The perfection which is composed of both is that which we have called "the purpose of Man's existence," for "perfection" and "purpose" are approximate in sense, the difference between them being established by relationship: "purpose" is that which is still in the confine of potency; when it reaches the confine of act, it reaches perfection.¹⁴

What is also fundamental in the proper employment of the rational faculty and the actualization of its purpose is shedding oneself of corporeal attachments. While maintenance of the physical body is of prime importance for Ibn Sina, the rational faculty must not be preoccupied with physical pleasures, and one's animal faculties must not dominate the rational soul. The reason for this is two-fold. On one hand, if the soul is preoccupied with the other two aspects, it will not be able to contemplate on perfections emanating from the Active Intellect, and the rational soul's union (*ittisal*) would be "hardened through interacting with coarse, earthly affairs,"¹⁵ and thus moral and spiritual perfections, which are from the world of Intellect, would not be acquired. When the rational soul is preoccupied with the dark, dense body, it is immersed in the realm of multiplicity, dependency, and non-being. Since all goodness emanates from the Necessary Being, it must move its attention away from the corporeal world and apprehend the luminosity of the World of Intellect. After all, the rational soul's nature is luminous, due to its being a non-corporeal substance (*jawhar*) and its movement in accordance with its nature inclines it towards its own kind.

Ibn Sina succinctly expresses the ultimate objective of the human soul.

The ultimate goal of the human soul is thus declared by Ibn Sina, the main exponent of this doctrine, to consist in becoming, through the intermediary of the Active Intellect, ‘identified with the intelligible world, in which the form of the whole is its rational order, and the good overflowing from it are inscribed.’ The soul, in fact, becomes through ‘conjunction’ with this intellect a replica of the intelligible world and achieves that ‘perfection’ proper to it as a citizen of that world.¹⁶

The bliss of the soul, in Ibn Sina’s ethics, is when

the substance is rendered perfect, and this is accomplished when it is purified through knowledge of God, for works for God.” Its purification through works for God consists of a) its being purged of vile and wicked qualities of character, b) its rehabilitation from blameworthy attributes and evil offensive habits by following reason and religious law, c) its being adorned with good habits, praiseworthy qualities of character, and excellent and pleasing traits by following reason and religious law.¹⁷

The goal then for Ibn Sina is adorning the soul with virtues so that

[t]he soul then becomes a polished mirror upon which are reflected the Forms of things as they are in themselves without any distortion, and whenever it stands face to face with them having been purified through knowledge, there ensues an automatic practicing of the theoretical philosophical sciences.¹⁸

For Ibn Sina, ethics is philosophically acquired through knowledge, and is an attempt to purify the rational soul, thereby acquiring the “propensity for contact with the Divine Effulgence,” i.e., the Active Intellect. When attempting to purify the rational soul, one is naturally required to use the intellectual faculties of the soul to guide the other subordinate faculties. Through knowing how to employ the faculties, one acquires wisdom, bravery, temperance, and finally justice. For Ibn Sina, acquiring virtues is rational, deliberate, and carried out through a process of learning about the soul discursively. Ibn Sina states:

As a matter of fact, I happened to write at the beginning of my career forty years ago a summary treatise setting forth the knowledge about the soul and related matters by following the method of those who engage in philosophy through research; whoever wishes to find out about the soul should study this treatise because it is appropriate for students who do research.¹⁹

Ibn Sina considered the purification of the rational soul through knowledge, the mode by which contact with the Divine effulgence is made.

Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi

In the case of Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, spiritual perfection revolves around the concept of Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) within the context of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). To mention briefly, the relationship of God with his creation is not one of causality in the philosophical sense; rather, it is an “emanation” (*fayd*) of His Self-Manifestation. This gradation in existence (*tashkik fi al-wujud*) is central in understanding man’s central position as the isthmus (*barzakh*) between God’s Non-Delimited Effusion of the Essence (*mutlaq al-fayd al-dhati*) and the levels of existence (*maratib al-wujud*) displaying the individual Names and Attributes in their own capacity. Causation is no longer the operative concept, since Divine effusion (*fayd al-uluhi*) descends through the Divine command “Be!” generating the different levels of existence without causal intermediaries. The descending command emanating from the Non-Delimited Effusion of the Essence creates the First Intellect, also called the Pen, then the Tablet, then the Throne, then the Chair, then the Heavens, one after another, then the elements,

then the “three progeny, minerals, plants, and animals,”²⁰ then finally man, who is coloured by all that which passed before him.”²¹ This emanation should not be viewed linearly as a causal chain as held by the Peripatetics but rather as a system of concentric circles emanating from a single source but differing only in magnitude or intensity. Al-Qunawi writes, “So the Command is a circle, and the journey is circular, not linear.”²² In light of this, man’s position is, as the Peripatetics viewed it, an isthmus (*barzakh*) between Divinity and the engendered existence. However, in Al-Qunawi’s metaphysics, there is a fundamental difference from the point of view of ontological status as being an isthmus. While Ibn Sina viewed man’s ascent towards perfection as a “bottom-up” process, Al-Qunawi views it as circular. In fact, the origin of man preponderates his ontological progression since the origin is the very Divine Spirit (*ruh-i ilahi*) and the very source for all other manifestations in the cosmos.

Al-Qunawi describes in *Kitab al-Fukuk*, a commentary on Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Fusus al-Hikam*, “Just as the Divine Presence, referred to by the name Allah, comprises of all the specific Attributes, their particular properties, and their inter-relationships, whereby there is no intermediary between the Essence and the Attributes, likewise man, from the point of view of his reality and his station, there is no intermediary between him and God. His reality is such that he is the comprehensive isthmus (*al-barzakhhiyyat al-jami’ah*) between the properties of necessity and possibility since he encompasses both.”²³ Man’s inward reality is identical with the Divine Reality since the “Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) is the locus of manifestation of the Comprehensive Name (Allah), and has a share in the glory of his Master, and thus becomes sanctified.”²⁴ While, the other things in creation manifest some Attribute or another, man assumes the unique position of manifesting all the Names. Al-Qunawi writes, “All beings are determined by the properties of the Names they manifest, each taking on a specific relationship and existential position.”²⁵ There is another aspect of the Divine Names that is at work in Al-Qunawi’s ethics. The Divine Names not only embrace all reality from an ontological point of view, but also represent those Attributes that man must strive to acquire. When man takes on an Attribute of God in his character, he is essentially emulating God’s ethics since none of God’s Attributes are in disharmony with another. They all manifest themselves in perfect equilibrium and form one essential reality. God’s being just is equally as important as His being merciful. All of God’s Attributes can be viewed as those very moral traits sought by the Peripatetic philosophers except that human perfection being a mirror-image of Divine Perfection is made explicit. This resounds of the common Islamic theme that God created man in His own form.

If the Perfect Man is the comprehensive manifestation of all the Attributes, what then is the imperfect man? Since all acts are themselves creations, or manifestations, no creature acts outside the Divine kingdom. Nonetheless, it is still possible for humans to be imperfect if they do not manifest a certain Name in its proper place, or if the manifestation of certain Names dominate others. Furthermore, what emanates from man, insofar as he is the isthmus, partakes in God’s Will through the Generating Command (*al-amr takwini*) which results in his free will. The acts that arise from this free will “must take up residence at a central point” and concord with the other Command emanating from the Divine Presence, and this is the Prescriptive Command (*al-amr taklifi*).²⁶ Both Commands must be brought out from the state of potentiality (*bi al-quwwa*) to actuality (*bi al-fi’l*) in order for the existential circle to be complete. Al-Qunawi writes,

Whoever leaves the Equilibrium of the Central Point – which is the Point of Perfection at the Presence of All-Comprehensive Unity [=the Reality of Realities] – will be judged for or against in keeping with his level’s proximity to or distance from the Center. Some are near, some nearer; some far, some farther. Between the total disequilibrium that pertains to Satanity (*shaytaniyah*) and this Divine, Name-derived, Perfect Equilibrium, all the level of the people of felicity and wretchedness [i.e., of heaven and hell] become entified.²⁷

The existential circle is, more specifically, a process through which man originates from the state of Non-Delimited Effusion of the Essence to the physical form of a human. As mentioned before, man's external existence is the final stage in creation after even the plants, animals, and minerals. It is the point of extreme multiplicity away from the Divine Unity. It is, however, his inner reality which remains Divine and thus allows man to traverse from existential lowness characterized by multiplicity and composition towards All-Comprehensive Unity (*ahadiyat al-jam'*). In *Al-Fukuk*, Al-Qunawi writes,

If man reaches the highest stage from his wayfaring and unites with the Souls and Intellects, and traverses them in their essential states until he reaches the station of "isthmus" (*barzakhiyya*), which is his original station after departing from the utmost extreme of multiplicity and its forms, he reaches the Unity of this multiplicity, then the *barzakhi* state...So the one who reaches his original nature, is the one whom 'We created in the best form,' and one who does not is the one whom 'We brought down to the lowest of the low,' for being distant, due to his multiplicity, from his original station of Divine Oneness.²⁸

Though Al-Qunawi's concept of the soul's perfection revolves around the concept of man's circular ascent, he draws out the soul's relationship with the body that in many ways resembles Ibn Sina's concept of the soul/body dichotomy, the important difference being that Al-Qunawi regards man's perfection as the manifestation the Divine Names that are latent within his original nature, whereas Ibn Sina, regards human perfections arising through the rational soul's uniting with the Active Intellect and representing the clarity of the First Truth. It is important to note, however, that both view this process of ascent or spiritual perfection through the shedding of attachment to the corporeal body. The following passage in Al-Qunawi's *Kitab al-Fukuk* illustrates this point:

When souls in their original state arose from Sublime Universal Spirits, referred to by the philosophers as the Intellects, they possessed qualities of those Spirits in various aspects, in being simple substances, and everlasting subsistence, they imagined that attachment to the bodies through governing them and control, would not limit them and that they would not fall in love with them, that they could, whenever they wished, they could turn away from managing them and be independent like the Spirits. And just like the Sublime Spirits, from which they arose, they forgot their descent from the station of the Spirits and their lack of independence from their attachment and management. So, when they become accustomed to the bodies and become colored by the properties of their composition, just as they affect them (bodies), they begin to love them and their delimitation increases by their companionship, God shows them their incapacity and deficiency to reach the station through which they arose. They see their poverty and turn back facing God with humility, beseechingly, in essential need in a way in which there is no intermediary between them and Him. God answers their plea and bestows upon them from Himself a light which illuminates whatever He so desires, and discloses from His Sacred Presence His subtle sublime secrets. Their love is reflected back to His Presence and united with it, and they obtain through this union a means to remove the intermediaries which is appropriate to Possessors of Strength and Vision. So the door which was closed to them is opened, and their governance becomes absolute and non-delimited by any form or another. Instead, what is achieved is power and perfection by which they can manage various forms at one time without attachment and delimitation.²⁹

In contrast to this, Ibn Sina states that individual souls come into existence only when they join the body, and that souls do not preexist. "Hence, when Ibn Sina states in the *Mi'raj Namih*, that Absolute Truth (*haqq*), or God, brought body and soul 'each from a different world,' he

means that the body is brought from the world of matter while the soul is from the world of Form by the Celestial Intelligences.”³⁰ Ibn Sina’s considers the soul’s completion from the point of view of its perfection, while Al-Qunawi considered it as a return to its original state. Both, however, stress the importance of spiritual exercise and detachment from lower aspects of the souls and likewise, the material body, since it is movement away from multiplicity and darkness towards Divine Unity and luminosity.

When considering the relationship between Ibn Sinan ethics and Sufi psychology, it might be added that Sufism viewed spiritual ascent as an extension of ethics, or perhaps the practical element of the philosophical questions of ethics. “Sufism is first and foremost a spiritual way. Only in a secondary sense does it present itself as an intellectual perspective (even though from another point of view, the perspective precedes the way).”³¹ Many philosophers divided ethics into two branches, theoretical ethics and practical ethics. Sufis also divided mysticism into these two branches, that is, theoretical mysticism, and practical mysticism. The subject of both fields is essentially the same: the soul. Although ethics discusses virtues and vices of the soul as it relates to its perfection and equilibrium, mysticism uses the perfected soul to journey towards God. It would not be possible to speak of one without the other, since the soul’s journey is in accordance with the virtues it acquires.

However, Al-Qunawi puts forth the idea that it is an existential movement of the soul and its journeying to its Lord. Furthermore, Al-Qunawi pays little attention in describing the soul’s essence. Rather, he alludes to it as the “Divine spirit,” and states, “The inability of the Peripatetic philosophers to grasp the soul’s true nature derives from the limitation of rational speculation.” Chittick adds, “When he does express his views on the soul, he usually refers to it in terms of various levels of man’s spiritual perfection.” Al-Qunawi states that, “Among the Greeks, the earlier ‘wise men’ or philosophers (*hukama*) based their teachings primarily upon the unveilings or ‘openings’ (*fath*) that they received as a result of spiritual practice, but after Aristotle, philosophy limited itself to those things that can be discerned by the intellect. If there were sufficiency and healing in rational proofs and disputational discussions (i.e. dialectics), neither the prophets and messengers nor their inheritors – the saints, who maintain and convey the arguments of God – would have turned away from these proofs and discussions.”³²

Al-Qunawi’s ethics is not grounded in the rational knowledge of the soul and its virtues; rather, the perfected soul is one that ascends the degrees of existence to gain proximity to the Singular Essence. Understanding Al-Qunawi’s ontology of the soul is pivotal in understanding why, according to him, it is not possible to perfect one’s soul exclusively with the aid of the intellect. His exposition of Ibn ‘Arabi’s central idea of the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*) points to the fact that “the varying degrees of human perfection represent ascending degrees of its manifestation and realization”³³ that comes about through the soul’s disengaging with the physical body representing multiplicity and ascending towards the unitary luminosity of the spirit.

Thus, man’s spirit is a luminous and unitary reality totally disengaged from his tenebrous and multiple body while his animal soul is a semi-spiritual entity possessing attributes of both sides. In a similar manner man’s body displays the properties of his animal soul, which in turn displays the properties of his spirit, which in turn displays the properties of his immutable entity. Each of the levels of existence contributes to making up the total human reality....³⁴

Whereas, Ibn Sina in the realm of ethics emphasizes “the yearning of the soul after its specific activities, by which I mean the different modes of knowledge and cognition, and the shunning of those activities proper to the shunning of the body, constitute its virtue or excellence,”³⁵ Al-Qunawi expresses that the soul is an existential entity and that its function is a development in accordance with the process of perfection such that the “perfect man traverses the ‘Circle of Being.’”³⁶ Al-Qunawi writes,

From the moment that man becomes a receptacle for his first ontological form ... he experiences transmutations within forms of the existents stage after stage, and he is transferred from form to form. For man these transferrals and transformations are an ascent (*'uruḡ*) and a wayfaring (*suluk*)....³⁷

While ethical perfection for Ibn Sina is primarily cognitive and secondarily transformative, spiritual ascent for Al-Qunawi is from the onset an ontological transformation of the soul. The different method employed by each thinker results from their metaphysical outlook of the nature of the soul. While Ibn Sina defines the ethical ideal as the equilibrium of the totality of ethical virtues acquired by the intellect, Al-Qunawi defines it as assuming the character traits of God by the soul's return to the Human-Divine reality.

Table of Key Transliterated Terms

Term Appearing in Text	Arabic	Fully Transliterated Term
'Ali ibn Sina	علي ابن سينا	'Alī ibn Sīnā
'Aql-i kull	عقل كل	'Aql-i kull
Ahadiyyat al-jam'	أحدية الجمع	Aḥadiyyat al-Jam'
Akhlaq-i Nasiri	اخلاق ناصري	Akhlaq-i Nāṣirī
Al-amr taklifi	الأمر تكليفي	Al-amr taklīfī
Al-amr takwini	الأمر تكويني	Al-amr takwīnī
Al-barzakhiyyat al-jami'ah	البرزخية الجامعة	Al-barzakhiyyat al-jāmi'ah
Fayd al-uluhi	فيض الالهي	Fayḍ al-ulūhī
<i>Fusus al-Hikam</i>	فصوص الحكم	<i>Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam</i>
Hadd al-tamm	حد التام	Ḥadd al-tāmm
Al-hayawan al-natiq	الحيوان الناطق	Al-ḥayawān al-nāṭiq
Al-insan al-kamil	الانسان الكامل	Al-insān al-kāmil
<i>Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat</i>	الإشارات والتنبيهات	<i>Al-Ishārāt wal-Tanbihāt</i>
Ittisal	اتصال	Ittiṣāl
<i>Jami' al-Sa'adat</i>	جامع السعادات	<i>Jāmi' al-Sa'ādāt</i>
<i>Kitab al-Fukuk</i>	كتاب الفكوك	<i>Kitāb al-Fukūk</i>
Maratib al-wujud	مراتب الوجود	Marātib al-Wujūd
<i>Mi'raj Namih</i>	معراج نامه	<i>Mi'rāj Namih</i>
Mutlaq al-fayd al dhāti	مطلق الفيض الذاتي	Muṭlaq al-Fayḍ al-Dhāti
<i>Risalah fi al-'Ishq</i>	رسالة في العشق	<i>Risālah fi al-'Ishq</i>
Ruh-i ilahi	روح الالهي	Rūḥ-i ilāhī
Sadr al-Din Al-Qunawi	صدر الدين القنوي	Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī
Tashkik fi al-wujud	تشكيك في الوجود	Tashkīk fi al-Wujūd
Wahdat al-Wujud	وحدة الوجود	Waḥdat al-Wujūd

¹ Mahdi Naraqi, *Jami' al-Sa'adat* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-'Alami li al-Matbu'at, 1988), 36-40.

² Ali ibn Sina, *Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat* II (Qum: Intisharat Balaghah, 1996), 290-291.

³ Ali ibn Sina, "Kitab al-Nafs" in *Shifa: Tabi'iyat* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 46.

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- ⁴ Shams Inati, *Remarks and Admonitions, Part one: Logic* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984), 17.
- ⁵ Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Akhlaq-e-Nasiri*, trans. G. M. Wickens, *The Nasirean Ethics* (London: C. Tinling & Co., 1964), 82.
- ⁶ Peter Heath (trans), *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina): With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
- ⁷ Ibn Sina, *Al-Isyarat I*, 82-87.
- ⁸ Sayyid Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Boulder: Shamballa, 1964), 199.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.
- ¹⁰ Ibn Sina, *Shifa: Tabi'iyat*, as cited in Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 260.
- ¹¹ Ibn Sina, *Risala fi al-'Ishq*, as cited in Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 261.
- ¹² Tusi, *Akhlaq-e-Nasiri*, 42.
- ¹³ Ibn Sina, *Isyarat*, 345.
- ¹⁴ Tusi, *Akhlaq-e-Nasiri*, 52.
- ¹⁵ Ibn Sina, *Isyarat*, 354.
- ¹⁶ Dimitri Gutas, *Ibn Sina and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 198.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ²⁰ William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 304.
- ²¹ Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, *Kitab al-Fukuk* (Tehran: Intisharat Mawla, 1991), 186.
- ²² Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, *Miftah al-Ghayb* (Tehran: Intisharat Mawla, 1994), 300-301.
- ²³ Al-Qunawi, *Kitab al-Fukuk*, 185.
- ²⁴ Al-Qunawi, *Miftah al-Ghayb*, 113.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ William Chittick, "The Circle of Spiritual Ascent", in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 187.
- ²⁷ Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi, *I'jaz al-Bayan*, trans. William Chittick, "The Circle of Spiritual Ascent", in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, 1992. 300-418.
- ²⁸ Al-Qunawi. *Kitab al-Fukuk*, 187.
- ²⁹ Al-Qunawi, *Kitab al-Fukuk*, 285-286.
- ³⁰ Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy*, 66.
- ³¹ W. Chittick, "The Circle of Spiritual Ascent", 180.
- ³² W. Chittick, "The Circle of Spiritual Ascent", 183.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 186.
- ³⁵ M. Fakhry, "The Platonism of Miskawayh and its Implication for his Ethics", in *Studia Islamica* XLII, 39-57.
- ³⁶ W. Chittick, "The Circle of Spiritual Ascent", 192.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.